THE ORDINARINESS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

January 19, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
1 Corinthians 12:4-11
Luke 3:1-14

"And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?'"
-Luke 3:10 (NRSV)

I often wonder how much graduating seniors remember of the speeches made on commencement day, a typical one of which can produce a torrent of rhetoric. I've been there. One time I delivered the baccalaureate sermon, in fact it was the first time I had been invited to do it. The sermon I produced and preached was substantial, heavy. It was about the truths and values and hopes of the Gospel set in the context of a witty critique of the world and culture and institutions the nervous graduates were about to enter, etc., etc. It went on for a while, you might say.

After lunch, we were at commencement. I was on the platform in a black robe on a very hot afternoon. The speaker, I recall, was from the State Department. He said about the same thing I said in the morning, without the Bible stories. Instead he told a lot of stories from his field experience. He too went on awhile.

And then we came to the faculty speech. At this particular college it is the custom for the senior class to choose a professor to address them as part of the commencement exercise. The class had chosen the Head of the English Department and I - not alone I know - sighed, tried to readjust my seat and dug in for what I assumed would be a third lap around the familiar track, this time with illustrations from Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, Chaucer perhaps. Some of us were praying for a miracle, like rain. And we received a miracle, not rain. The Professor stood up and said:

"I have three things to say...

"Learn more than you know now, because what you know now isn't really very much.

"Don't forget your family.

"Stay healthy. Don't drink too much and don't make yourself ill with stress.

"P. S. Send your children to Muskingum College."

And he sat down. The audience was stunned and I, again not alone, thought, "Is that all?" and of course realized quickly that the graduating seniors had heard nothing that day any more important than that -

-learn more;
-don't forget your family;
-stay healthy.

It happens on occasion. Joe Paterno, football coach at Penn State, was invited to address the university commencement. It was the year Paterno had turned down a very lucrative offer to coach the New England Patriots and his decision was discussed a lot and was criticized in some quarters. So his speech is a good one, but the crisp, brief conclusion is one of the best I've ever read. He said:

"I tell my team: 'keep hustling. Go all out on every play no matter how bad things look, because if you keep hustling something good will happen. And usually it does.'"

There is something of this dynamic - brevity, simplicity, profundity in deceptively, uncomplicated bits of advice and surprise, almost disappointment. There is something of that going on in the incident recorded in the third chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke which we heard this morning.

It is one of my very favorites. I am intrigued by it.

We're not sure what to make of this John the Baptist character. We're not even sure we like him much. He's so fanatical, tough, uncompromising, and peculiar - eating locusts and wearing a loin cloth. I don't even remember which one it was, but in one of Hollywood's attempts to tell the story of Jesus, he was played with a kind of terrible frenzy by Michael York; and Michael York screaming almost convulsively at a group of very uncomfortable men and women is the image that pops into my head every time I think about John the Baptist.

Luke is getting us ready to meet Jesus - God's son - savior of the world. And we're not sure what all this John the Baptist material has to do with that.

John comes out of the desert, preaches "Gospel," which in this case is a radical condemnation of the way people are living and a radical call to repentance and conversion, symbolized by baptism. John calls his listeners snakes scurrying for a hiding place before a spreading fire - not a terribly comfortable metaphor.

John made the Romans very uncomfortable. They watched him, arrested him and executed him in short order. John baptized Jesus - made Jesus uncomfortable enough to step into the water of the river one day and begin his work.

This day John was going on about God's coming judgment and the ax at the root of the tree and snakes fleeing... and the crowds asked, "What shall we do?"

You might have expected him to say:

> "Sign up and become a part of the new community I am organizing," or "come along to our desert monastery and live a life of purity in the wilderness," or "join the guerrilla movement," or "lay down your life," or "send in a check to keep this ministry going."

It was, after all, a powerful and defining moment which he had created by the compelling passion of his preaching. So it is a surprise - a let down actually - when they ask, "What shall we do?" and he says:

> "If you have enough food and clothing for yourself, share some with those who do not; and if you are a tax collector, don't cheat; and if you are a soldier, don't take advantage of your authority; and everybody, don't take what isn't yours; and be content with what you have."

John had an opportunity to propose radical change and chose instead to hand out a few terribly ordinary bits of ethical advice.

Our assumption is that religious conversion is or ought to be pretty dramatic. Our expectation is that tax collectors will repent, quit being tax collectors and become preachers. Conversion ought to be dramatic, at least interesting. There was an item in one of the journals I read recently about a New York Times interview with Claudette Colbert who just turned eighty-eight, starred in sixty-seven films and worked as an actress for

seven decades, was married to the same man, quite happily, and about who no one knows any scandal. There is, obviously, no autobiography forthcoming. No publisher, no public, would touch such an ordinary book. Ordinariness is not very interesting. [Context, Martin E. Marty, 11/20-27/91]

Now there are some things going on here that the scholars want us to see. First of all the inclusiveness. Luke is getting us ready for Jesus and one of the things he most wants us to know about God's son is that he is the savior of all people, not just a few. So that cast of characters includes tax collectors: quislings, traitors, Jews who did the Roman's dirty work and who everybody loved to hate. And soldiers... that is, Roman soldiers, occupying soldiers, gentiles, enemies. This is an improbable inclusive religion. All are welcome: men and women and children - not just men, gentiles - not just Jews, Greeks, sinners, soldiers, prostitutes, lawyers and politicians. And please note Luke's consistent focus on public behavior. The response to God's grace is not private piety, certainly not a retreat from the world. It is public, economic, social, and political.

*Share what you have with the poor.

*Don't cheat, lie, steal.

*Don't take advantage of others.

Simple? Sometimes not so simple. Sometimes it seems that religious people have more than a little trouble with basic things like kindness, compassion, understanding, tolerance.

Mary McCarthy said somewhere that as far as she could see, "religion made good people a little better and bad people a little worse."

Sometimes it's not so simple in a culture which is becoming as pluralistic and diverse as ours is. Sometimes it seems that, for one reason or another, the simple moral maxims which guided us in the past are simply out of date, irrelevant.

In a speech here two weeks ago, University of Chicago historian, Martin Marty, talked about a dynamic which he predicted would occur and which has - namely the tribalization of American life on racial, ethnic and religious lines.

Marty once wrote that the issue for religion is the way it always wants to become a "tribe" designed to define who the insiders are and to keep everyone else out.

> "Tribalization has a bearing on how we live. If people are to coexist, there must be civility, even at the cost of conviction." [By the Way of

Response, p. 86] The committed are often not civil, Marty observes, and the civil are uncommitted.

There is, is there not, a lingering suspicion that the fanatics, the zealots, are the only true believers? There is a world-wide turn to fundamentalism, the characteristics of which are an absolute conviction about what is true and good, and a total commitment to excluding variation. It really doesn't matter whether it comes from Islam or Christianity, from the Right or Left politically, from the McCarthyism of the 50s to the Political Correctness of the 90s, the result is the same - the sacrifice of civility, tolerance, compassion, in the name of conviction.

We can't afford that. We can't afford David Duke's racism, or anybody's vision of a homogeneous, Anglo-Saxon republic which disappeared sometime around the turn of the century, any more than we can afford the rap music threat which proposed burning down Korean grocery stores in the ghetto as a way to establish racial justice.

> How are we ever going to talk about abortion, Marty asks, when what we euphemistically call a debate is really an "uncivil war between bearers of bumper stickers who divide the world into two camps." [Ibid, p. 100]

In a review of an important book, Culture Wars, The Struggle to Define America, Alan Wolfe observes that "on the basis of political ideology Americans are willing to tolerate fantastic abuses of public trust." [See Context, 1/1/92]

And so we witness high government officials who - in the name of ideology, lied to the country and the Congress, destroyed the evidence, and undercut the law of the land - rewarded by public adulation... large, adoring audiences and congregations wherever they speak.

So maybe John's advice isn't so simple after all. Share, don't cheat, don't take advantage. Perhaps here is where civilization stands or falls. Perhaps here at the moral bottom line, the ordinariness of life, is where a culture's viability is established or destroyed.

One thing is certain, it's where most of us do our living. Most of us will not have the opportunity to be moral heroes or heroines. Most of us will not respond to God's claim on our lives by dropping what we are doing, selling all and becoming missionaries, because we can't actually, can't that is to say, without walking away from people who count on us and need us and whose lives are in some sense, our responsibility too. Some of

us have to find a religion and a spirituality and a discipleship which makes sense where we are and has something to do with keeping on keeping on.

The late Karl Rahner was one of the most distinguished churchmen and theologians of the century. He wrote:

> "The demands of everyday morality are not easy at all. Everyday life as it is already asks of a lot of us."

We know about that. Integrity defined by income tax returns. Compassion defined by a relationship with an aging parent who is not at all nurturing or maybe even loving or kind to us any longer. Justice defined by entering a voting booth and casting my ballot on some basis other the my own self-interest, or tax rate. Loyalty defined not by a heroic testimony and martyrdom but by staying with a relationship through difficult and unsatisfying times. Discipline defined by not leaving without trying. Devotion defined by not giving up on the kids.

It's what the motion picture, "Grand Canyon" is about: a successful white lawyer helped and probably saved by a black man simply doing his job; a gang-banger saved by the white man trying to find some way to say a simple thank you to the black man; a marriage saved by a baby... The fact that simple, ordinary kindness, consideration, honesty, loyalty... are, as a matter of fact, not simple at all, but always miracles.

Rahner wrote:

> "To keep on through dull, tedious, everyday existence can often be more difficult than a unique deed whose heroism makes us run the danger of pride." [Meditations on Hope and Love, p. 22]

The **Ordinariness of the Christian Life** - that's where it is for most of us, slugging it out day by day, trying to make ends meet, and to be as good as we can at what we do, and to use what we have responsibly, trying to be honest and kind and just.

Rahner wrote:

> "When we are true to our conscience...God's kingdom comes to us just where we are, living quite ordinarily, carrying on patiently."

"What shall we do?" they asked the preacher. What shall we do? "Live it out," is the answer still: live it out with compassion, kindness, integrity - the ordinariness of the Christian life. Amen.